Taking A United Approach

The Mount Alexander Shire is a rural municipality located in Central Victoria. The shire consists of larger townships such as Castlemaine and Maldon (Victoria's first notable town), small townships and a large area of rural faming land. The shire covers an area of 1529 square kilometres and has a current population of approximately 17,200. The shire offers a range of living experiences from dense residential, semi rural, farmlets and large farming properties. This provides residents of the shire with varied lifestyle options, however provides a diverse range of attitudes, priorities and values when it comes to animal ownership. Prior to March 2003, the shire utilised temporary holding facilities for stray animals which did not cater for large numbers of animals and certainly not for the holding of cats or kittens. In March 2003, the R.S.P.C.A opened its newly constructed animal shelter in Castlemaine and provided Council with the opportunity to use the facility as its contracted pound facility. With the introduction of a shelter facility and pound, the community soon began to utilise this facility for stray animals, surrenders and inevitably for the disposal of unwanted litters of kittens. The pattern of regular residents attending the shelter with the box of "stray" kittens every breeding season began to grow. The figures of kittens being brought into the shelter highlighted the growing issue of unwanted litters of kittens. In 2003, the first year of operation of the shelter, the number of kittens brought in to the shelter was 77 which climbed dramatically in 2004/2005 where the figures were up to 160. Discussions took place between Council staff and shelter staff with a view to finding solutions to the ever increasing problem. From the Council perspective, the costs of the high numbers of kittens being impounded were of a budgetary and resourcing concern. The impact to the shelter was the ever increasing costs of euthanasia and the emotional stress felt by shelter staff and volunteers when having to deal with the large number of kittens being euthanased. The contracted veterinarian practice was small in size with an already heavy workload. The practice found that they were having to deal with the issues of resourcing the regular sessions at the shelter which generally involved large groups of kittens to be euthanased which also resulted in emotional stress issues for the attending veterinarian staff. It was felt by all parties that the issue of unwanted litters of kittens was of great concern to the community and other stakeholders, and was one that needed to be addressed with urgency. Introduction of new laws such as mandatory desexing were discussed, however as there was already a low rate of registrations for cats and with the difficulty of ascertaining ownership of cats and the resourcing required to enforce such a law, it did not appear to be a practical solution. It was felt that the only way to attempt to combat the problem was the encouragement of residents to desex their pets yet the cost of the procedure was still a deterrent for the animal owners. Subsidised vouchers were made available to residents via the desexing scheme operated by the Municipal Association of Victoria and the Veterinary Association of Australia. However these were not utilised heavily by residents as a requirement of the vouchers was that the owner must hold a relevant concession card and the animal had to be immunised which animal owners saw as extra costs.

In 2005, Council was approached by a representative of the R.S.P.C.A Victoria with the offer of funding available from several philanthropic trusts and the RSPCA Foundation (Investment Fund). These funds were being made available as a part of a regional desexing scheme. With the availability of funding, it was decided to take a united approach to the issue of unwanted litters of kittens. Discussions took place between Council officers, shelter staff and owners of the contracted veterinary practice at Vets All Natural in Castlemaine. The issue of unwanted litters of kittens had affected each of these stakeholders by means of costs, stress, and frustration. The discussions were aimed at the introduction of a cat desexing scheme that would encourage cat owners to have their animals desexed. Many questions were raised such

as who to offer the scheme to, how would it operate and where would the extra funding come from. Vets All Natural put the offer on the table to provide the service of desexing both male and female cats at a highly reduced rate. Council was approached and resolved to match the funding made available by the R.S.P.C.A. As a result of the three organisations contributing financially to the program, it was established that we could offer residents the purchase of cat desexing vouchers for the price of $16 for male cats and $25 for female cats. Discussions also took place on who the vouchers would be offered to. During these discussions it was found that a major target group was the middle income families. While these families were receiving incomes which were high enough to exclude them from receiving government benefits, with burdens of other financial responsibilities such as mortgages, schooling costs, personal debt etc, the household pets and in particular cats became a low priority when it came to the costs associated with the desexing and general veterinary care of the animal. It was decided to limit the vouchers to residents of the shire without any other restrictions. Concerns have been raised during the program such as residents using the vouchers when they have obvious means as to not require this assistance. However it has been agreed by all parties that the prime objective of the group was to raise the number of desexed cats to prevent the increase of unwanted litters irrespective of the sometimes obvious exploitation of the vouchers. To date, 225 female vouchers and 155 male vouchers have been purchased by residents and we are now starting to see a change in the figures of kittens being brought into the shelter. The most significant changes in the figures are appearing between 2008 and 2009 which is showing that this program needs to be run over a number of years before the full impact of its success is known. Some reductions in numbers have been as much as 85% in some of the busier months, for example, in March 2008 there were 38 kittens brought into the shelter in comparison to only 5 in March 2009. It is hoped that we can continue to offer the vouchers for a few more years to try and continue the trend we are now seeing in the 2009 figures to date. Another benefit of the program has been the increase in cat registrations with Council with the ability to ascertain ownership of more cats.

From an operational aspect, much discussion went into how we would promote and sell the vouchers. The first round of vouchers were advertised for purchase from Council offices in the local papers, The veterinarian practice put aside allocated days and times for appointments specifically for the purchasers of the vouchers. Whilst there was a tremendous response to this launch, it was found that the bulk purchases caused undue stress and pressure on both customer service staff at council and also on vet staff who had to deal with emergency tasks as well as the bulk desexing schedule. Another issue that was discovered at this point was that many owners had brought in cats with either underlying health conditions or pregnant cats. This meant that the Veterinary practice was significantly financially affected as desexing procedures on these animals took a longer time to complete and involved more complicated surgery. One major change at this point was made to the vouchers which was to clearly state on the vouchers that the cost did not include any complications which may arise and therefore the veterinarians were able to negotiate a separate payment with the cat owner if necessary. After the initial launch other methods of promotion were trialled and there is now a wide method used to promote and sell the vouchers. Vouchers are now made available from the shelter and stalls are periodically set up in local supermarkets and shopping areas to sell and promote the vouchers. This system has proved to be effective as it appears that residents were more likely to approach the shelter for assistance rather than the Council offices as in most cases the cats are currently unregistered when the owner makes the first approach to purchase a voucher or seek assistance. Other methods of promotion and sales are-

- Encouragement of purchase of vouchers to persons who bring kittens into the shelter to prevent further litters.
- Regular advertisements in the local papers.
- Council officers offering the vouchers in the course of normal duties when approaching animal owners in response to complaints.

- Advertising of the vouchers on Councils website.
- R.S.P.C.A promotion on their website.
- Promotion of the vouchers at Councils customer service desk by means of LCD screen which runs pages on a continuous cycle.
- Having the vouchers available at all "responsible pet ownership" events ran by either the R.S.P.C.A or council.
- Veterinarians being able to advise clients of the availability of the vouchers.

In conclusion, it is felt that this program is an example of what can be achieved if stakeholders unite and work together to tackle issues which affect the community as a whole. This program has proved to be a success with the involvement of three very different groups. There has been the involvement of local government, a charity/welfare organisation and a private business which have worked together to attempt to combat an issue which has affected all of them in different ways. The numerous stakeholders have all received benefits from this such as-

- Pet owners have been given the opportunity to have their cats desexed at a highly reduced rate which prevents them from having to deal with the issues of unwanted litters of kittens in the household and the stress associated with trying to house these animals after weaning. It also gives them the opportunity to use the money saved on desexing for perhaps other animal needs such as immunisation, registrations, housing and general animal maintenance.
- The community benefits in the long term with fewer undesexed cats wandering in their neighbourhood preventing spread of diseases and other issues such as spraying and territorial behaviour.
- The shelter is now seeing fewer numbers of kittens being brought into the facility and now have better opportunities for rehousing these kittens rather than having to assist in the euthanasia of high numbers which results in less costs and certainly less stress and emotional impacts on the staff and volunteers.
- Council costs are reducing with the lower numbers of kittens being impounded. Councils profile in the community has also been lifted as a result of an obvious attempt to assist community members with their pets needs. An example of this is the number of community members from surrounding shires contacting the Local Laws Unit with requests for assistance in getting their own municipalities to run similar programs. The number of registered cats has also steadily increased.
- The contracted veterinarian practice is benefiting from less resourcing required to attend at the shelter for large groups of kittens to be euthanased. The practice has also received excellent publicity and an increased client base for the involvement in the program and the veterinarians have been able to educate cat owners on the care and needs of their pets when they attend the practice to have the desexing procedure performed on their cats.

It is hoped to continue to make this program available to the residents of the shire for further years. We will continue to explore methods of distribution and promotion of the vouchers in the hope of continuing to raise the numbers of desexed cats in the community and as a result continue to reduce the numbers of unwanted litters of kittens. This program has been extremely rewarding for all that have been involved in its inception and ongoing coordination and has showcased that organisations from local government, welfare and private enterprise can all work together for a united cause.